

A few weeks ago my juniors put aside reading Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and their discussion of how it informs an understanding of Emerson's "Self-Reliance" and *The Fountainhead*, so they could practice writing the short answers and a simple composition for the TAKS test. They have been writing these kind of easy responses since elementary school, and the students collectively groaned as I put them through their TAKS writing paces yet another year. Given the opportunity to take the exit level test, most if not all of them could have passed it easily in middle school. But because students must yet again demonstrate competency that appears to be at a 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade level, they will lose several class days in a mandatory review of information they've long ago mastered. For teachers around the state, there's a credibility disconnect between Austin and high-achieving schools that renders both students and teachers frustrated in having to apply non-applicable, lower than grade level skills.

One of the major fallacies of today's education system is that all students academically mature at the same rate. Almost all of my students have earned a commended status on their ELA exams, and absolutely all of them have passed their ELA with no problem for years. I take no credit for this: the TAKS ELA exam simply is not reflective of where they are academically. Sadly, the writing skills used to score well on the TAKS test are not transferable to college-level writing; they're just too elementary. TAKS testing doesn't forecast successful matriculation to college; rather it merely assesses a minimal command of English and a seemingly random set of non-transferable skills.

My classroom writing curriculum is directed by three goals: 1) teaching SAT and ACT test skills; 2) giving lots of practice for the AP English Language and Composition exam; and, 3) preparing students to be successful writers in college. TAKS skills are peculiar to Texas' test and do not contribute to any writing students do in AP classes.

To prepare students for college-level writing and the AP exam, I teach students the art of rhetoric: how to persuade effectively through argumentation, how to write with purpose, and how to analyze. They write two to three page essays every week in response to a prompt regarding one of the nine novels we discuss in our class. Additionally, students learn how to use sources to back their arguments, writing 8-10 page research papers over current controversial topics. Students are quizzed over their novels using the format of AP exams, so they learn how to read closely, discern inferences, and predict outcomes. The inevitable effect of this rigorous approach is that students also improve their scores on both SAT and ACT tests.

Alumni report back to me that were amply prepared for college level writing, and most end up being placed in honors programs in college. Last year 94% of my students passed the arduous AP English Language and Composition exam, and the majority of these students received the top scores of 4 or 5, which will earn them college credit for their efforts.

The value of standardized testing, whether it be AP, SAT, ACT, or TAKS, lies in the resultant understanding of how students being tested rank in comparison to others being tested. When we align our students' educational futures with minimal levels of competency, we can assuredly predict mediocre achievement. Though I understand that many children need intervention to reach that minimal level, I fear that our approach in Texas is focused almost completely on the lowest achievers, which inevitably will shortchange our brightest students. If we were to let students demonstrate their exit-level competencies when they actually reached them, as opposed to when the state was ready for them, we would have fewer and fewer students taking exams as they advanced through their high school years. This would relieve school personnel to focus on those students who need remediation to pass the test. By using nationally accepted assessment tools, like the SATs, ACTs, or AP exams, we more accurately measure the achievement of Texas students nationally. Students need to exit out of the TAKS system when they show competency, so they can keep climbing academically.